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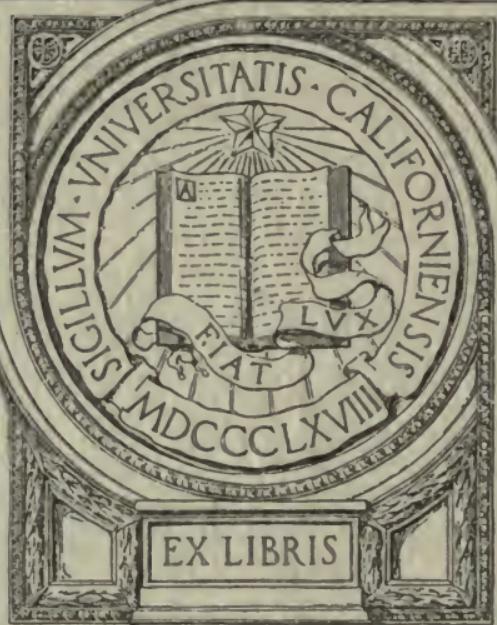
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OUR
WIDENING
THOUGHT
OF GOD



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OUR WIDENING THOUGHT of GOD

“YET I DOUBT NOT THROUGH
THE AGES ONE INCREASING
PURPOSE RUNS ~~on~~ AND THE
THOUGHTS OF MEN ARE WI-
DENED WITH THE PROCESS
OF THE SUNS.” *Tennyson.*

*By CHARLES SUMNER
NASH, President of the
Pacific Theological
Seminary*

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By Paul Elder and Company
San Francisco

Class of 1914

TO MY STUDENTS

Class of 1902

By Way of Introduction

The address which follows was prepared for a special purpose and delivered in San Francisco, March 19, 1914. The occasion was planned in the interest of expanding views of certain main Christian truths, concerning which differences of opinion had disturbed the public mind. No less than fourteen hundred persons testified by their presence their alert interest in the themes presented. This address was one of three, the other topics being "The Changed View of the Bible" and "Christ from the Modern Point of View." The addresses were received most sympathetically and evoked many expressions of appreciation and gratitude. They were printed in response to an urgent call and circulated widely.

This address is now published in the hope that it may reach a still larger number of thoughtful readers who may be helped through confusion into clearness or cheered and sustained in their religious convictions. The author assumes to speak for no one but himself. There are, however, large and enlarging numbers within and without the churches who hold the interpretations here offered and find life deepened and enriched. These are not final conceptions. Spiritual experience will be granted yet wider horizons and profounder realities in the knowledge of God. Life is infinite and "the rapture of the forward view" is endless.

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WE ARE here tonight in no spirit of controversy or conceit. We would say no word that would sting or hurt those who may differ with us. We would not disparage the past. We are children of our fathers. They have lifted us to our high estate. If we stand upon their shoulders, it is what they desired and trained us to do. We should be sadly false to them if we had failed to make the advance for which they prepared and charged us.

We are, moreover, the children of those who counted religion the supreme interest and duty of life. If they expected the new day to be fuller of light—and they certainly did expect it—it was the light of God upon the human spirit that they meant. It is our duty to them as well as to God, in grateful memory of all they knew and taught us, to live and learn beyond them. We have reverenced and obeyed them by going forward. In this generation mankind has made bewildering strides and is still marching on in seven-league boots. No department of human thought and life is at a standstill. And in the universal process, wheresoever religion has ignorantly or timidly or stubbornly halted in its tracks, there it has lost its opportunity and declined its duty. As

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a general truth, it has not halted nor held back. Religion is a conserving and steadyng force in human life. In these marvelous new days, when men are so intoxicated with the wine of life, religion should not lose its poise. Advance it must make, afraid of nothing, appropriating and interpreting all truth, adapting itself to all conditions, maintaining its control of human thought and action. It must think and speak in the language of the day, or men will cease to understand and then will cease to listen. And these days in which we live are so rapid that religion finds it hard to keep its eternal values intelligible to swiftly changing thought and applied to human need. But its effort to advance without loss and hurt is far more valiant and successful than many suppose. Religious truth is roomy and spacious; there are cozy corners for those who are content with what they have, and far horizons for those who are off and away, eager and not content. Long advance in religious thought and experience has been made in the last seventy-five years. It should not be counted strange. The greatest changes that have ever occurred in human thought and knowledge and in their application to living conditions have come since 1850. And the men who have been thinking out religious truth and applying it to life are the same men who have lived through the wondrous changes in science and philosophy

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and education and economics and morals and social service. And men must unify their thinking; not long can they keep religion in a separate compartment. All truth is one, and religion must be at home everywhere.

I.

God is the final reality; beyond Him human thought can not go; short of Him it can not rest. Thought about God is thought in its farthest reach. Experience of God is the deepest need and desire of man; consciousness of it his joy and strength, his transforming power. It follows that a change in our conception of God can be nothing less than a most profound and vital change. Such a change has passed and is passing over our Christian thought, surpassing all the more superficial, yet astounding changes of our time. This change may be characterized as follows:

In method it is an exchange of the intellectual for the experimental, of elaborate interpretation for simple statement of fact and reality. Greek philosophy "took a simple faith and left an elaborate system of belief. It added to the bulk of doctrine, but not to its vitality or working vigor."¹ Metaphysical inquiry and discussion took the place of the experience of the heart. The way unto God and the life in God became too largely intellectual assent to manifold doctrine.

1. Clarke—"What Shall We Think of Christianity?" p. 71.

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Elaborate interpretations were substituted for the heart of the truth. Then these elaborations were fixed in formal and authoritative creeds. "The Church went on to build the doctrine into a scholastic system. The system has grown, until the head of the organization stands as the infallible teacher."¹

Christian truth has come down to us thus elaborated and formalized. But men have always been thinking for themselves and no official creed has been final. The cry of the heart for truth and power could not be stifled, and the search has been continuous for the real and simple truth beneath the burdensome and powerless forms. The real truth has remained, however overlaid. Today more than ever men insist upon finding it and rejoicing in it as the essential thing. It has recently been said, "The permanent element in the doctrine (any doctrine) consists in the declaration of the great experimental truths; the changing and passing element consists in the various interpretations of those truths, made from time to time in human thought. We need to be called back to the realities, where the power dwells."² As fast, brethren, as we recognize this difference between the central reality and the various interpretations, between essentials and non-essentials, we shall cease to strive over interpre-

1. Clarke—"What Shall We Think of Christianity?" p. 72, 73.
2. Clarke—"What Shall We Think of Christianity?" p. 92.

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tations and shall welcome one another "back to the realities, where the power dwells."

It is true at this moment that men are tired of insistent discussions of non-essentials and are seeking a vital experience of the simple heart of truth. They are seeking God less by the hard labor of the mind than through moral sympathy, through the trust and love of the heart. We are inquiring after God, not of philosophy, but of Jesus Christ, His Son, our Brother. We are listening to His words, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God;" and, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father."

II.

Beholding God in and through Jesus Christ, we are surer than ever that we have found Him to be a Person. In the Man of Nazareth was a fulness of life whose measure we can not take. Before His clear and guileless consciousness of communion with the personal God we stand in awe. The religion which He taught is nothing else than such communion. The life into which He restores men is the same experience of personal communion with God. For nearly two millenniums Christians have been repeating the mysterious experience of divine fellowship, of exchanging thought and feeling with an infinite Friend. We have not lost His personality in His infinity. In Him all the

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elements of true personality are raised to perfection. Lacking all incompleteness and limitation, He is the self-existent, self-conscious and self-directing Person. We may or may not think Him out in philosophical terms, or present Him in a creed. The vital thing is that we find and recognize Him and share the fulness of His life.

Though we never can compass His being, we have a wealth of vital experience too wonderful to be suppressed. Hence the historic doctrine of the Trinity. This was not an effort of sheer metaphysics; it was an earnest attempt to formulate an experience of the personal God too complex for simple definition. The doctrine of the Trinity has persisted and will persist. The permanent element in it is "the declaration of the great experimental truths;" the voluminous, labored interpretations are good for those who find them helpful. Believing souls recognized in Jesus "the fulness of the Godhead bodily," God incarnate, God manifest in humanity. Through Him they apprehended God Himself, whom Jesus called Father, the final Reality, the self-existent One, who so loved as to reveal Himself to redeem His children. Through Christ, again, they became aware of God dwelling in their hearts in a ministry of power, and they called him the Holy Spirit. These three seemed all so real and so divine as often to be held separate and equal while yet they blended into the single conception of the infinite God.

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It has been difficult to keep the unity of God. There are three persons in one God, said the ancient thinkers. Popular faith and worship have often had three gods, losing the unity in showing full reverence to each. Modern thought is now clearing and establishing the unity. The three are persons only in an ancient sense, not in the modern meaning of separate personalities. The one God holds all the relations there are with His created universe. In every experience it is God Himself we meet, not some representative of God. "The universe is one," says the thinker quoted above, "and God is one. One God, one mind, one will—this is the only form in which any belief in God whatever is possible in the world as we know it now. * * * God Himself is the Father, God Himself is the divine in Jesus Christ, and God Himself is the Holy Spirit." The writer may well add, and we adopt his words, "There is not less divine indwelling than the ancient doctrine affirmed, but more, but it is the indwelling of God. 'I will dwell in them' (2 Cor. 6:16) is a true word without diminution."¹ We shall keep the terms and figures of the ancient doctrine of the Trinity. Our interpretations will differ, but that is not essential. Some will reduce the terms to mere modes of three-fold manifestation of the one God. Others will hold the doctrine in a different sphere, as the worthiest

¹ Clarke—"Christian Doctrine of God." p. 237, 246.

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effort to express the limitless wealth of our experience of the infinite God. Beneath all varieties of interpretation we dwell together as brethren in the one God, our Father.

III.

Another change which has passed over our religious thinking is a change from legal, formal and institutional to personal conceptions. We used to think of God as monarch, wielding the sceptre and jealous for His throne. We thought of Him as King over a kingdom of sheer power, triumphing over enemies, reducing all creatures to subjection, ruling in majesty and might. We thought of Him as Judge dispensing severe justice over creatures of wrath, condemning and punishing, inflicting endless and hopeless penalties, as the only way to sustain His omnipotent government. We are learning at last, really learning and understanding, that God is our Father, and that we are not subjugated enemies nor condemned culprits, but children beloved and cherished. Our Father is indeed Lord of all, clothed with infinite majesty. To His lordship we must forever answer. But as we find God in Christ, the greatest truth regained—most true of Him and us, supreme over all other truths, determining all His relations with us—is His Fatherhood and our sonship. This truth is now radiant and surpassing. The filial relation is chief of all.

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“Our Father” is the address to be forever on our lips. By that must all truth and duty be tested and explained. Our days should be those of growing children, responsive to our Father’s love, unfolding in His light, approaching His moral perfection, working with Him and with one another. The extent and significance of this change from the institutional to the personal we may be slow to appreciate; but no sooner do we catch its first meanings than we know ourselves delivered into the “liberty of the glory of the children of God.”

What is the character of God? is the deepest question of the ages. Our reply now is this:—God is what Jesus of Nazareth said He was, what Jesus Himself was. He is like Christ. There is nothing higher to be said. Our thought can not reach beyond the perfect character and divine consciousness of Jesus. Seeing the Father in Him “sufficeth us.” How profound and complete it is, yet how simple! It is not metaphysical analysis, it is spiritual vision. It finds the inmost truth about the divine nature, because it finds God Himself. God is in Christ, and he who accepts Christ by faith receives God and knows Him by the kinship of moral life and the answer of love. Much remains to learn of God, but there is no different God to replace Him whom we have found in and through Jesus. We have begun to live in the Living One. Thus have Christians always found God

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through Christ the Way, but have been confused and burdened by the elaborate creeds enforced by faulty leaders who could not believe that it was enough to see God in Christ. The return to this simplicity of faith and vision is a modern renewal of life at its very source.

Learning of Jesus Christ, our modern emphasis is now resting upon God's moral perfection and His love. God is a holy being, and God is love, we are chiefly saying. Those are the truths we most need to know of Him. Those are the most radiant and mighty qualities in Jesus. Those are the truths bearing most commandingly upon our duty and most blessedly upon our welfare. His truth, His wisdom, His justice, His power,—all His attributes we revere. "But the central element in the doctrine of God is the moral and religious. Not the divine power, but the divine character is at the front. Not the philosophy of His nature, but the love and righteousness of God is the primary fact in the doctrine."¹ There is an extraordinary moral reaction abroad at the present time. Men feel the call to rectitude and perfection. Salvation is seen to be a moral process, however miraculously it may begin in renewal and conversion. It is deeply felt that God will have nothing less from men than the pursuit and attainment of holy character. Christian living is not so much church membership or cere-

1. Clarke—"Christian Doctrine of God." p. 53.

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monial worship as it is likeness to Christ in character and service. The sincere soul acknowledges that all his actions must be clean and right, out of a character whose spirit and substance are holy as God is holy. Never an age so complex and confused; nor ever an age when men of sincere and intelligent purpose bowed so surely to the moral imperative. We must work out our own salvation till we are perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. The victory of holy character must be won.

It can be won, for love is supreme. Not alone by resident human forces must our salvation be worked out, for God worketh His own will in us. The truest and greatest word about the nature of God is that He is love. Whatever else our Father is, love is His inmost being, His all-pervading quality. However He may appear to act toward His children at any time, His love is always perfect and supreme. Else were He not our Father. Love is not mere good nature, that men should do all manner of evil with impunity. But the Father's love is mightier than the waywardness, the resistance, the weakness and the guilt of His wilful children. He will help them through, by whatever devious and painful ways, unto perfection and filial love, if they are willing; nay more, will not His love prevail to make them willing and bring them home? Shall sovereign and exhaustless love fail?

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So stands men's hope today, believing that infinite love will make the victory of holy character complete and universal, and that "good shall fall at last, far off, at last to all."

IV.

Another far-reaching change in our conception has been that which is represented in the modern doctrine of the immanence of God. His transcendence has always been a great article of our faith. It means that God is greater than all that He has created and independent of it. It was often held to mean that God was absent from the world—an "absentee God." He kept the world running by resident forces. Its regular processes went on without His immediate action. Occasionally He broke in by what is called a miracle, but for the most part He remained aloof, He governed from without.

We have always had, it is true, the precious truth of the divine omnipresence. We have believed God present everywhere. He could act instantly at any point or at all points. Men could reach Him with their praise and prayer, and were the objects of His unfailing care. Thus have we brought near the infinite and transcendent God. We have rejoiced in the rich Scriptures which set forth His presence with men, His providence, His spiritual indwelling, His

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immediate transforming influence—in a word, His communion with His children.

In this truth of the divine presence we have reality and complete vital values. We might use the term omnipresence for the recent great expansion of our thought and faith. We have, however, taken the term *immanence* instead. We have made a new discovery of God's vital relation to His universe. We have caught new meanings in the old truth that the transcendent God, who surpasses all, dwells in all. We have discerned that His real presence everywhere is a continuously creative presence. The processes of life do really work by resident forces, but those forces are not merely set in motion by the Creator, they are the continual action of the indwelling Spirit. He creates and sustains and governs, not from without, but from within. Modern philosophic thought has reached this revelation, and Christian thought finds its Scriptures rising to the height of the great argument. The late Professor Bowne has put it in this way: "In the new conception the supernatural is nothing foreign to nature and making occasional raids into nature in order to reveal itself; but, so far as nature is concerned the supernatural is the ever present ground and administrator of nature; and nature is simply the form under which the Supreme Reason and Will manifest themselves. This is the doctrine of the divine immanence to

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which philosophy is coming in its search after the cosmic causality. We come down—to a Living Will which worketh hitherto and worketh evermore. * * * The commonest event, say the fall of a leaf, is as supernatural in its causation as any miracle would be; for in both alike God would be equally implicated.”¹ “The instructed theist, then,” he adds, “sets aside the self-running nature and the absentee God. * * * For him God is the ever present agent in the ongoing of the world, and nature is but the form and product of His ceaseless activity.”¹ The same writer says again: “The presence of God in nature does not mean that God is here and there in the world performing miracles, but that the whole cosmic movement depends constantly upon the divine will and is an expression of the divine purpose. In like manner the presence of God in history does not mean exclusively, or mainly, that God is working signs and wonders upon occasion, but rather that God is carrying on the great historical movement and working His will therein.”²

This is the Christian view of the relations of God to His universe. “Of Him and through Him and unto Him are all things.” In the divine Son “all things hold together.” “Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from Thy presence?” “He that dwelleth in the secret place of

1. Bowne—“Immanence of God.” p. 17, 24.

2. Bowne—“Immanence of God.” p. 43.

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the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” “Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit.” Not a sparrow “shall fall on the ground without your Father,” and “the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” “The God that made the world, and all things therein, giveth to all life and breath and all things; He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live, and move, and have our being.” The deepest spirit and drift of the Scriptures carries this truth of the most intimate indwelling and creative contact of God in nature and in man. It can not be overstated. God is forever uttering and imparting Himself. His love is incessantly out-poured. His children may be “filled unto all the fulness of God.”

In this truth of the immanent God an immense change has passed over our religious thinking and our Christian living. Two or three implications call for special mention. In the first place, the orderly processes of nature and human nature have taken the evidential place formerly held by miracles. We need not disbelieve in miracles. God is still omnipotent, able to operate in startling ways if need be, to bring in a higher law to check the operation of a lower—for that is what miracles are now seen to mean. But the “isolated wonder” is no longer necessary to manifest God’s presence

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and display His power. Every living blade of grass is proof of His inworking energy; so is "each glad, obedient planet" that "sings through the web that time is weaving;" so is the marvelous pageant of the seasons, the birth of children, the love of mothers, the awakening of Helen Keller through the infinite ministry of love; so is every open eye and vocal tongue and every vital breath. Evolution is still a fearsome word to many devout souls, but it has revolutionized our thinking. Its truth does not banish God, but intensifies the light and power of His presence. It is but a study in the method of God's operation in nature and man.

"A fire-mist and a planet,
A crystal and a cell,
A jelly-fish and a saurian,
And caves where the cave men
dwell;
Then a sense of law and beauty,
And a face turned from the clod;
Some call it evolution,
And others call it God."

It is evolution, and it is God. The whole ageless process is the creative work of the Eternal, who, moment by moment, everywhere, worketh hitherto and forevermore.

Then the words "natural" and "supernatural" may be cleared of confusion. You can not draw a distinct line through God's creation and call the lower part natural and the higher

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part supernatural. The only place to draw the line is between the whole created universe on the one hand and God on the other. The created universe is the natural, and God is the supernatural. Nor are these anywhere separate, the one from the other. They dwell together, each in the other, in an intimacy deep beyond our comprehension.

“Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with
God.”

Nor do the words “sacred” and “profane” or “secular” express valid distinctions. Nothing in the natural order is unhallowed, for all is filled with God and is the expression of His life. Doubtless we erring children profane the sacred works of our Father, debasing even our own spirits which are the highest of God’s creations. Doubtless, too, it is necessary for us to set apart some things to moral and religious uses—days of rest and worship, a Lenten season, churches, cathedrals, abbeys, rituals, a peace palace, homes, hospitals, God’s acre. But we need to hold all things as of God and sacred, save as touched by moral evil.

There are certain special workings of these changed emphases and modern conceptions which marvelously enrich our religious experience. We are becoming familiar with the divine order of life and serenely con-

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fident of our secure place therein. "Not chiefly in flashes of God, but in a steady world, is the divine reality revealed." We learn to rest with settled confidence in the steady world filled with the faithful God. There grows within us the sensitive realization of that inner Presence. Every blossom is opened by His hand. Every tree stands in His strength. Every bird sings in the Father's joy. On the hills or by the sea, we walk in His mystic presence, where "In His temple everything saith 'Glory'!"

V.

We rise, then, to the higher levels of the truth. Chiefly does God dwell in the spiritual order of which all intelligent beings are a part. In Him we have our being. In higher and richer volume than in a tree does God, who is a spirit, dwell in His children. Our being is of the same kind as God's being, since we are His offspring. We used to believe—just yesterday—that human nature and divine nature were essentially unlike and could not interpenetrate save in the one Person, Christ Jesus, in some miraculous union. We are now convinced that the Father and His children are alike. There are not two diverse kinds of spirit. The human is capable of receiving and expressing the divine. In the one matchless Person the expression was unhindered and perfect. But all communion with God is an incar-

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nation, and all true living is, so far as it goes, a manifestation of the incarnate God. The intimacy of an obedient and visional soul with the indwelling Spirit of God is too profound and pervasive to be understood perfectly. We strain our speech to utter it.

“Closer is He than breathing,
And nearer than hands and feet.”

“He is not so far away as even to be near.” Jesus prayed, “Even as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in us.” In this mystery shall we not somewhat amend the language of our spiritual experience? God does not come; He is with us. He does not withdraw; else we should instantly die. We do not go here or there to find Him. We do not leave Him when we depart. Prayer should not be an agony of pleading to move a reluctant God; rather, the trustful inquiry of a child after the Father’s will, and a serene infilling with the Father’s power. Doing the will of God is no grudging obedience to arbitrary commands, no mere fulfillment of written orders. The will of God is His infinite energy working in perfect love toward His perfect ends. And doing His will is accepting our Father’s purposes and throwing all our kindled force into the onward sweep of His power. Living thus in Him and He in us, why not with a sound mind in a sound body, with abounding energy

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and contagious love? Surely so, in so far as we can take the vital currents of the indwelling God. Such living is "under the aspect of eternity." It makes "our noisy years seem moments in the being of the eternal silence." It believes that sovereign love can not be defeated. The holy city of God can be brought down out of heaven and built, all glorious with redeemed humanity, here on earth. The materials for it are here, in the divine nature of God's children pervaded with the Father's redeeming presence, in the awakening of the children to their heavenly inheritance and the victorious power within and among them. Here, too, is founded our hope of personal and social immortality. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall we appear with Him in glory. Children created in the image of God, redeemed by His incarnate love, sustained by His inflowing and abiding presence, have no other destiny than their Father's home. The world today believes, as it never knew enough to believe before, the Father's word through Jesus, "I go to prepare a place for you, and will receive you unto Myself."

The widening thought of God has brought a fulness of life unknown to any preceding age. "The tabernacle of God is with men * * * and God Himself is with them. * * * And He that sitteth on the throne saith, Behold, I make all things new."

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